

Senator Charles Poochigian



CAPITOL UPDATE

MAY 13, 2004

Nearly 13,000 Students Granted Waivers from Basic Algebra Requirement *Close to 200 Districts Fail to Ensure Math Proficiency by High School Graduation*

"Algebra is a gateway skill. A grasp of algebraic concepts inspires a higher level of critical thinking, and aids with real world problem solving. Students leaving high school with the ability to do basic algebra can benefit greatly as they prepare for vocational training or higher education."
- **Senator Chuck Poochigian**

The California State Board of Education (State Board) approved last-minute waivers today for over 160 school districts across the state that failed to comply with state law ([SB 1354 - Poochigian](#)) requiring that all students graduating in the 2003-04 year complete a course in Algebra I (or equivalent) in order to receive a diploma. In total, the State Board has now granted close to 200 waivers from the algebra requirement.

Algebra Requirement Background

[SB 1354](#) (Poochigian) was signed into law in 2000, making completion of a basic algebra course a graduation requirement. The primary goal of this legislation was to ensure that students receive the instruction they deserve and to raise the bar so that students would have the tools to be successful coming out of high school.

The bill also responded to a 1999 action by the California State Board of Education (State Board) incorporating content standards for Algebra I into the California High School Exit Exam (exit exam). Students should receive instruction in algebra – particularly if they are to be tested on the subject. Every school district across the state was notified of the algebra requirement, and given close to four years to comply with the law.

Waiver Requests Flood State Board

Last year, the state delayed the exit exam as a graduation requirement, faced with the possibility that large numbers of students would be held back. Although the exit exams were postponed until 2006, the algebra requirement still went into effect for the 2003-2004 school year. However, in January 2004, the Santa Cruz City School District applied for a waiver because the district apparently failed to inform students and teachers of the requirement. The State Board reluctantly granted a waiver so that students would not be unduly punished for the district's clear failure.

Since that time, the floodgates have opened, and in the past five months the State Board has received close to **200** waiver requests from districts, accounting for nearly **50%** of California's 328 K-12 unified and 93 high school districts. Some districts claimed that, like Santa Cruz, students and teachers had not been notified of the requirement, while others said that they believed the algebra requirement had been postponed with the exit exam. According to the State Board about **13,000**, or **four percent** of the state's high school seniors, have not yet passed the course and would be in jeopardy of not graduating without the waiver.

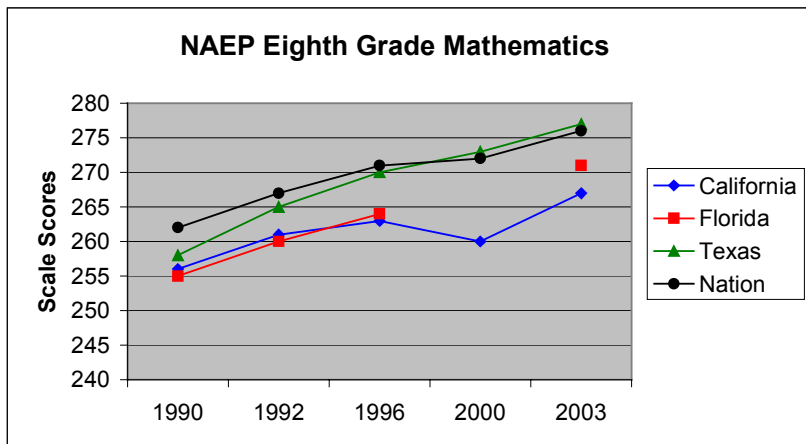
[View the State Board's Summary of Key Issues Surrounding the Algebra Requirement, and a List of Districts Applying for the Waiver](#)

Accountability in Education?

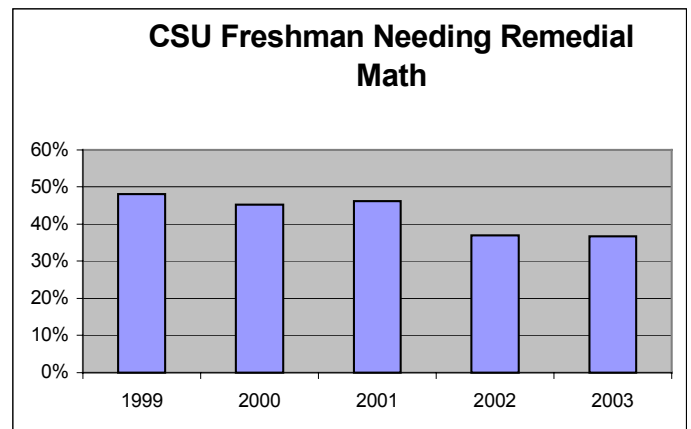
"In the past year, California has delayed the day of reckoning for thousands of students who are either not being taught, or are not learning a basic math skill that the state has deemed necessary for a high school diploma. Social promotion is bad for both the students who need more attention, and for their peers who pass tests and complete required courses in order to receive the same degree. The goal of education is not to make people feel good, it is to stimulate students intellectually and prepare these students to be successful in a competitive 21st century workforce."

- Senator Chuck Poochigian

California schools have been improving, but on the whole, we still lag far behind other states. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), while improving, California ranks well below the national average in eighth grade mathematics scores (see graph below).



Source: NAEP



Source: CSU

In 2002, almost 40 percent of first-time freshman attending a California State University (CSU) required remedial math courses consisting of beginning and intermediate algebra. This number is still far higher than it should be, but has declined significantly since 2000, the year the law requiring Algebra I as a high school graduation requirement was signed (see graph above).

The State Board has made it clear to local school districts that they do not intend to consider consent waivers for the algebra requirement in the future, and that schools are required to notify the students and parents of 2005 of the Algebra I graduation requirement.

"We must strive for higher achievement in our education system. We fail our students if we continue to allow them to graduate from high school without the ability to pass basic math. Some districts have far exceeded the algebra requirement – requiring geometry and higher levels of math – acknowledging the importance of a mathematical foundation to a student's vocational success and higher education aspirations. If California is to remain at the forefront of innovation and technology, we must ensure that the diplomas we give to our children represent a first-class education."

- Senator Chuck Poochigian

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